

Amendments to the Claims:

This listing of claims will replace all prior versions, and listings of claims in the application:

Listing of Claims:

1. (Currently Amended) A computer-implemented method of refunding value applied to a spoiled mail item bearing sensitive information, comprising the steps of:
 validating, by a validation unit, a postage imprint associated with a mail item in a mail item stream, the mail item bearing sensitive information, wherein the postage imprint does not satisfy at least one validation criterion;
 assigning the mail item as being a spoiled mail item;
 separating the spoiled mail item from the mail item stream;
 presenting at least one of the spoiled mail item and the associated postage imprint to a postage service, so that the sensitive information is not readable by the postage service; and
 refunding the value applied to the spoiled mail item based on a determination by the postage service, the determination based at least in part on the postage imprint.
2. (Currently Amended) The method of claim 1, wherein ~~each~~ the step of validating the postage imprint further comprises scanning the mail item for the postage imprint.
3. (Previously Presented) The method of claim 2, wherein the at least one validation criterion requires the postage imprint to have at least one physical characteristic, comprising at least one of a position, size, and color of the postage imprint.
4. (Previously Presented) The method of claim 1, wherein the validation step comprises reading data from the postage imprint.

5. (Previously Presented) The method of claim 4, wherein the at least one validation criterion requires authentication of at least part of the data read from the postage imprint.

6. (Original) The method of claim 5, wherein the authentication of at least part of the read data requires the at least part of the read data to have a predeterminable format.

7. (Original) The method of claim 5, wherein the authentication of at least part of the read data requires the at least part of the read data to match check data.

8. (Previously Presented) The method of claim 1, wherein the postage imprint is a printed imprint.

9. (Previously Presented) The method of claim 1, wherein the postage imprint is an electronic label.

10-11. (Canceled).

12. (Previously Presented) The method of claim 1, further comprising
separating a section of the postage imprint, the separated section including an authentication code and excluding the sensitive information, to allow the separated section to be presented to the postage service with the sensitive information not being readable by the postage service.

13-14. (Canceled).

15. (Previously Presented) The method of claim 1, wherein the spoiled mail item includes a label on which the postage imprint is provided, and further comprising the step of:

separating the label from the spoiled mail item to allow the label to be presented to a third party, with the sensitive information not being readable by the third party.

16. (Previously Presented) The method of claim 1, further comprising the step of:
obliterating the sensitive information on the spoiled mail item to cause the sensitive information to be unreadable by the postage service.
17. (Previously Presented) The method of claim 16 wherein the obliterating step comprises the step of:
over-printing the sensitive information to render the sensitive information unreadable.
18. (Previously Presented) The method of claim 16 wherein the obliterating step comprises the step of:
applying a panel over the sensitive information to render the sensitive information unreadable.
19. (Previously Presented) The method of claim 16, wherein the obliterating step comprises the step of:
cutting out a section of the spoiled mail item including the sensitive information.
20. (Previously Presented) The method of claim 1, further comprising the step of:
packaging the spoiled mail item to conceal the sensitive information and allow the spoiled mail item to be presented to the postage service, with the sensitive information not being readable by the postage service.
21. (Previously Presented) The method of claim 1, wherein the spoiled mail item includes a cover sheet which includes no sensitive information and on which the postage imprint is provided, and further comprising the step of:
separating the cover sheet from the spoiled mail item to allow the cover sheet to be presented to the postage service, with the sensitive information not being readable by the postage service.

22. (Previously Presented) The method of claim 1, further comprising the step of:
generating a spoiled item notification for the spoiled mail item for communication to a remote center.
23. (Previously Presented) The method of claim 22, further comprising the step of:
electronically transmitting the spoiled item notification to the remote center, wherein each spoiled item notification transmitted to the remote center is transmitted separately or multiple spoiled item notifications are transmitted in batches at predeterminable intervals.
24. (Previously Presented) The method of claim 22, wherein an image of the postage imprint associated with the spoiled mail item is acquired in the validation step, and each spoiled item notification includes the image which excludes the sensitive information to allow the image to be presented to the postage service, with the sensitive information not being readable by the postage service.
25. (Previously Presented) The method of claim 1, further comprising the step of:
crediting a refund credit register for the value applied to each postage imprint for each spoiled item.
26. (Canceled).
27. (Previously Presented) The method of claim 1, further comprising the step of:
writing a postage imprint for a subsequent mail item in the mail item stream, wherein the written postage imprint contains an authentication code contained in the postage imprint of the spoiled mail item.
28. (Canceled).

29. (Previously Presented) The method of claim 27, wherein the postage imprint is an electronic label and the writing step comprises the step of:

electronically writing to an electronic label on the subsequent mail item.

30. (Previously Presented) The method of claim 1, wherein the mail item comprises documents, the documents comprising one or more sheets.

31. (Canceled).

32. (Previously Presented) The method of claim 1, wherein the mail item comprises at least one of document carriers, envelopes and mail carriers.

33. (Previously Presented) The method of claim 1, wherein the sensitive information is encoded separately from the postage imprint.

34. (Previously Presented) A mail handling system for refunding value applied to a spoiled mail item bearing sensitive information, comprising:

a validation unit for validating a postage imprint associated with a mail item in a mail item stream, the mail item bearing sensitive information, and for assigning the mail item as being spoiled where the postage imprint associated with the mail item does not satisfy at least one validation criterion;

a sorting unit for separating the spoiled mail item from the mail item stream, with the postage imprint of the spoiled mail item being presented for authentication by a postage service, so that the sensitive information is not readable by the postage service; and

a control unit for controlling operation of the system, wherein the control unit includes a refund credit register and is operative to credit the refund credit register with the value applied to the spoiled mail item, the spoiled mail item being authenticated by the postage service based at least in part on the postage imprint.

35. (Previously Presented) The system of claim 34, wherein the validation unit is operative to scan the mail item for the postage imprint.

36. (Previously Presented) The system of claim 35, wherein the at least one validation criterion requires the postage imprint to have at least one physical characteristic comprising at least one of a position, size and color of the postage imprint.

37. (Previously Presented) The system of claim 34, wherein the validation unit is operative to read data from the postage imprint.

38. (Previously Presented) The system of claim 37, wherein the at least one validation criterion requires authentication of at least part of the data read from the postage imprint.

39. (Original) The system of claim 38, wherein the authentication of at least part of the read data requires the at least part of the read data to have a predeterminable format.

40. (Original) The system of claim 38, wherein the authentication of at least part of the read data requires the at least part of the read data to match check data.

41. (Previously Presented) The system of claim 34, wherein the postage imprint is a printed two-dimensional barcode.

42. (Previously Presented) The system of claim 34, wherein the postage imprint is a radio frequency tag.

43. (Canceled)

44. (Previously Presented) The system of claim 34, wherein the mail item includes an electronic label containing the sensitive information.

45-46. (Canceled).

47. (Previously Presented) The system of claim 34, wherein the postage imprint is removable from the mail item to allow the postage imprint to be separated and presented to the postage service, with the sensitive information not being readable by the postage service.

48. (Previously Presented) The system of claim 34, wherein each mail item includes a label on which the postage imprint is provided to allow the postage imprint to be separated by removal of the label, and thereby allow the label to be presented to the postage service, with the sensitive information not being readable by the postage service.

49. (Previously Presented) The system of claim 34, further comprising:
an obliteration unit for obliterating the sensitive information on the spoiled mail item to allow the spoiled mail item to be presented to the postage service, with the sensitive information not being readable by the postage service.

50. (Previously Presented) The system of claim 49, wherein the obliteration unit comprises a printer for over-printing the sensitive information to render the sensitive information unreadable.

51. (Previously Presented) The system of claim 49, wherein the obliteration unit comprises an applicator for applying a panel over the sensitive information to render the sensitive information unreadable.

52. (Previously Presented) The system of claim 49, wherein the obliteration unit comprises a cutter for cutting out a section of the spoiled mail item including the sensitive information, so the spoiled mail item includes no sensitive information.

53. (Previously Presented) The system of claim 34, further comprising:

a packaging unit for packaging the spoiled mail item to conceal the sensitive information, and thereby allow the spoiled mail item to be presented to the postage service, with the sensitive information not being readable by the postage service.

54. (Previously Presented) The system of claim 34, wherein the mail item includes a cover sheet which includes no sensitive information and on which the postage imprint is provided to allow the cover sheet to be separated from the mail item and presented to the postage service, with the sensitive information not being readable by the postage service.

55. (Previously Presented) The system of claim 34, wherein the control unit is operative to generate a spoiled mail item notification for the spoiled mail item for communication to a remote center.

56. (Previously Presented) The system of claim 55, wherein the control unit includes a communications module for electronically communicating with the remote center, whereby spoiled item notifications generated by the control unit are transmitted electronically to the remote center, and each spoiled item notification is transmitted separately or spoiled item notifications are transmitted in batches at predeterminable intervals.

57. (Previously Presented) The system of claim 55, wherein the validation unit is operative to acquire an image of the postage imprint associated with the spoiled mail item, and the spoiled item notification includes the image which excludes the sensitive information to allow the image to be presented to the postage service, with the sensitive information not being readable by the postage service.

58. (Previously Presented) The system of claim 34, further comprising a writing unit for writing the postage imprint, wherein the control unit is operative to control the writing unit to write the postage imprint comprising an authentication code contained in the postage imprint associated with a previous mail item assigned as being spoiled.

59. (Previously Presented) The system of claim 58, wherein the postage imprint a two dimensional barcode, and the writing unit comprises a printing unit.

60. (Previously Presented) The system of claim 58, wherein the postage imprint is an electronic label, and the writing unit comprises an electronic label writer.

61. (Previously Presented) The system of claim 34, wherein the mail item comprises documents including one or more sheets.

62. (Canceled).

63. (Previously Presented) The system of claim 34, wherein the mail item comprises at least one of document carriers, envelopes and mail carriers.

64. (Previously Presented) The system of claim 34, wherein the sensitive information is encoded separately from the postage imprint.